

Career Brief #2: *On Writing Better*

Good written communication skills are essential to success in most careers. Just think of how much of our work requires writing – reports, proposals, memos, letters, policies, and procedures. The list goes on and on. Yet the ability to express ourselves in clear, concise, complete and correct documents can seem quite a challenge. This is particularly true in government organizations where there is often an over abundance of “bureaucratese.” Writers using this style choose long, complex words and sentence structure over simple, to the point, expressions. It seems they are writing more to impress than to express. The problem is that often the message is obscured or totally lost with this writing style. Here are a few tips for avoiding this trap and producing well written and readable documents.

Know Your Reader

It is important to remember this about readers – they are lazy. On an average, readers spend only 20 seconds reading each typewritten page. If the document looks like it is hard to read, the reader will probably not read it at all. Also, readers usually have other things on their minds and are frequently not really interested in what you have to say.

Consider the level of difficulty at which you write. The majority of popular publications, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, are written on a 10th grade level or below. Although many of our readers could read something written on a higher level, they merely would rather not. Because the competition for their time and attention is so great, they appreciate clear and concise writing.

Another important consideration about readers is their knowledge of the subject matter. In some cases, it may be necessary for you to give background information to get your meaning across. However, you may lose your reader by providing unnecessary detail. The point is not to frustrate your reader by giving too little or too much information.

Know Your Purpose

Generally, the purpose of most business writing is to inform, persuade, document or request. A good rule is to state your purpose early in your writing. Avoid the “mystery story” approach, which keeps the reader in suspense. Remember that readers are lazy. They may tire and lose interest before you even have a chance to state your purpose. So, state the purpose early – in the first sentence or paragraph. This is referred to as “prime time” and is intended to grab your reader’s attention.

The concluding sentence or paragraph is the second most important part of your writing. It is called the “pitch” and it should leave the reader with specific instructions, feelings, or an impression.

Write The Way You Talk

A well written letter or memo is one in which you hear the writer's voice. Picture the reader standing before you and ask yourself, "What do I want to say?" This will help you to use simple words and sentences and avoid obscure or bureaucratic writing.

Bureaucrats have a habit of selecting a longer word when the more natural and simpler word would get the message across better. For example, bureaucrats never:

- Read your proposals—they always take them under advisement
- Speed up the work of government—they expedite it
- Lower requirements—they minimize them
- Increase effectiveness—they maximize it

To avoid this style, choose the simple words and avoid overly long, complex sentences. As a rule, readers, if they bother, will have to re-read sentences longer than 17 words. If you want them read, keep your sentences short.

Be Concise and Specific

Use as few words as possible to get your message across. For example, a phrase like "in view of the fact that" could be shortened to one word – "since." Other examples include:

- At the present time – now
- In the event that – if
- In the near future – soon

Check something you have written recently. You may be surprised at how many words could be left out with no change to your message.

It is also a good idea to use terms your reader can picture by selecting the most concrete word or phrase possible. This will help you be sure your message is not confused. Do not ask your reader for a reply "in a couple of weeks" when you really mean you need it by May 3.

Add Variety

There are four basic tools to help you add variety to your writing: words, sentences, punctuation, and format. While it is good to use simple, natural, concrete words and sentences, do not let that restrain your creativity. Be yourself! Allow your style and personality to be reflected in what you write.

Your individuality can be expressed through variations in word selection, sentence structure, and punctuation. Do not become overly attached to "pet" words or repetitious sentence structure. Review the rules of punctuation so you can vary your sentences. Make full use of dashes, parentheses, colons, semicolons, and exclamation points.

The only other method you have of adding variety to your writing is through creative use of format. Readers can be motivated by format alone. If a document looks difficult to

read, they will avoid it. However, an attractive format can increase the likelihood of it being read. How you put the information on the page can be critical.

Two important parts of format are (1) appropriate margin size and (2) proper use of paragraphs to break up your writing. Try to limit the size of paragraphs to 12 typewritten lines. Combine paragraphs under topic headings when you are covering numerous topics. Other helpful tools for using format include the use of charts, graphs, and lists when they are more effective than straight narrative. Finally, add emphasis to your writing by using underlining, italicizing, and varying print colors.

Keep Your Tone Appropriate

Tone refers not to what we say, but how we say it. Inappropriate tone usually results from failure to consider how your writing will sound to the reader. Consider these statements:

- Your comment about the treatment received from one of our employees is indeed surprising because we instruct all our employees to be civil, kind, and thoughtful, even under the most trying circumstances.
- You misunderstood the statement in my memorandum of November 25.

While what is said in these examples may well be true, both statements imply that the reader is at fault. This approach will obviously alienate the reader. Keep in mind that the written word can express feelings almost as well as the spoken word. Written communications may be friendly, courteous, thoughtful, and professional or they may be abrasive, angry, and sarcastic.

One good way to keep your tone appropriate is to make your language positive. Why say, “I cannot come to your home before August 8” when you could say, “I can come to your home after August 8”? And isn’t “Certification will be issued when you complete item 9” more positive than “Certification will not be issued until you complete item 9”? There is an inherent weakness in using negatives, such as *cannot* and *not*. Readers are generally more interested in being told what is instead of hearing what is not.

Use Action Language

Action language refers to sentence structure in which the subject is the doer of the action. Writers do well to use the active rather than the passive voice, when possible. For example:

- Passive: It has been recommended by the committee.
- Active: The committee recommends.

- Passive: The client was seen by me.
- Active: I saw the client.

There are good reasons for preferring the active over the passive voice. The passive voice makes writing boring; the active voice is more direct, vigorous, and emphatic. In

addition, the active voice almost always uses fewer words. Overall, active language is more effective and more interesting.

Always Re-Read

Although the last, this is the most important of the writing tips. Always revise and edit. Never send something without re-reading, taking it apart, and re-writing again if necessary. Remember, your writing is a reflection of yourself. Many times you may never have the opportunity to meet your reader; the reader's impression of you may be based strictly on your written work. The tips in this Career Brief will help improve your writing, but they do not take the place of good grammar. An extremely valuable resource regarding proper grammatical construction is a very small and inexpensive book entitled "The Elements of Style" by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. If you are truly interested in improving your writing, you will get a copy and refer to it often.

**An e-publication of the DPSCS Professional Development and Training Division,
April 2005.**